leaders anytime soon, he has got the job.

If Johnson is re-elected, the job is not all that important. No one doubts that Muskie, given the chance, would serve him faithfully and well. But if Johnson loses and a Republican Administration comes to Washington, it would have to work with a Democratic Senate, and the leader of that Senate suddenly would be a very powerful person indeed.

It could be the story of the Eisenhower Administration all over again — and every schoolboy knows what became of the fellow who led the Senate in those days.

— Douglas Kiker

Laos

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As the war in neighboring Vietnam increases in intensity, there has been new talk out of Washington about proposals to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos and cut off Hanoi's infiltration of men and supplies to South Vietnam. As Senator Mike Mansfield, among others, argued publicly in Washington this spring, the building of a fortified barrier (minefields, strong points, and barbed wire) across southern Laos' panhandle has a certain appeal. One U.S. Embassy official in Saigon noted, "No one has ever won a war against guerrillas who maintained an open supply line to a friendly nation."

Although Hanoi has used coastal blockade-runners to get arms into South Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail has been its major route for troop reinforcements — as many as 7000 a month by Pentagon estimates. The Trail, a [illegible] paths and truck tracks, runs down [illegible] through mountain defiles to the savage "tri-border area," where the borders of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam join. In further violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords on the neutralization of Laos, Hanoi keeps upwards of 40,000 labor troops, depending on the season, for repair and maintenance of the Trail. By using the Trail through the Laotian panhandle, Hanoi's troops can make an end run around the Demilitarized Zone and the allied troops just south of it.

The war trail

The problem has become more acute since mid-1967. Enemy pressure on the U.S. Marines in South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces has been increasing, quite aside from the spring's bloody battles along the DMZ. Security around Huế, Quangtri City, and Danang has deteriorated in the past year, as North Vietnamese reinforcements, coming across the mountains from Laos, have stiffened the local Viet Cong. To a lesser extent, the same trend has occurred to the south in the Central Highlands. As long as the Trail remains open, so the argument goes, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong can keep up the war in the south indefinitely.

Bombing the Trail has put a strain on the enemy, who have to move at night. Viewed in daylight from the air, the Trail's so-called Route 96, east of the Laotian town of Saravane, is simply a scar out into the green mountainside, flanked by bomb craters and expended flare parachutes, with no sign of life. The rains further curb truck activity during the May to September monsoon, turning dirt roads into bogs. But enough men and supplies keep coming south, by all accounts, to replace heavy casualties and build new units.

The barrier proposal most often cited — and war-gamed in the past — is the Route Nine plan, which, in effect, would extend the forty-mile allied "front" south of the DMZ another 125 miles to the west. Route Nine is an old French-colonial dirt road which winds through the Communist-held valleys of the mile-high Annamite Chain, west to the Mekong River in Laos. To the United States, which built the Burma Road, the terrain does not pose insuperable [illegible] By the Pentagon's most estimates, would require up to 100,000 American troops. They would be needed to shield and support the barrier against serious attack from both north and south — and Hanoi could be expected to spare no effort to frustrate a Route Nine plan. The Pentagon is already hard-pressed to maintain 450,000 men in South Vietnam (only about 80,000 of them are infantrymen). In Vietnam the United States Army is rich in machines, elaborate logistics, and supporting arms, but poor in riflemen. Officials in Saigon and Vientiane find it hard to imagine where Lyndon Johnson could find 100,000 extra troops to send into Laos, without greatly increasing draft calls and calling up reserves.

Moreover, in the opinion of most diplomats in Thailand and Laos, the enlargement of the Vietnam war could not be limited to southern Laos. Hanoi, however hard-pressed, would certainly be able to muster enough troops to make a diversionary counterattack in northern Laos, possibly even a foray across the Mekong against the United States air base at Nakorn Panom, in northeastern Thailand. Thus, still more American manpower would be required.

As William Sullivan, the United States ambassador to Vientiane, is well aware, the military burden of the "barrier" is only half the problem. A massive United States intervention in southern Laos would be a violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords and of the acceptable status quo, which the Soviet Union could not ignore. The prospect gives Communist diplomats in Vientiane the jitters. The political price of the barrier would be a revival of the dangerous Soviet-American confrontation that the 1962 accords, however bent and frayed, managed to avert. "Laos is one of the few places where the détente still exists," observed one American diplomat. "Is it worthwhile breaking it?"

The acceptable prince

In May, Prince Souvanna Phouma, durable sixty-five-year-old Premier of the rightist-neutralist coalition, made clear in Vientiane his fears of any intensification of the war in Laos.

Prince Souvanna's pleas for his avowed policy of neutrality and the